



Committee date:	23 September 2020
Report Of:	Neil Wightman, Director of Housing
Portfolio:	Cabinet Member for Housing Services
Report Author and Contact Details:	Andrea Luker, Housing innovation & improvement aluker@westminster.gov.uk

General Update

- 1.1** This report provides an overview of management of the Council's housing stock for the current financial year. A full suite of performance information is provided at Appendix A. All figures provided are for the year to date, April to July 2020 (period 4). In view of the uncertainty of the impact of COVID19 on performance, targets have not been amended for 2020/21 and remain as set in 2019. At the time of setting, all targets required an improvement on previous performance levels and were benchmarked against published performance for high performing London boroughs.
- 1.2** When COVID19 lockdown was imposed, housing services were restricted to ensure the safety of residents, staff and the wider public. Services have since been reinstated in an adjusted, safe and sustainable way.
- 1.3** The COVID19 pandemic has resulted in ongoing changes to service delivery arrangements to keep residents and everyone involved as safe as possible. The housing service has responded with speed, care and consideration to the needs of residents, with a range of innovations to ensure service delivery continues in a safe and effective manner. In addition to simple changes in practice, the housing digital team has worked with the operational teams to find digital solutions to enable services to be maintained or re-started where appropriate.
- 1.4** The virus has impacted on housing services in a variety of ways.

 - Antisocial behaviour service has seen a 34% increase in reporting but has achieved an increase in customer satisfaction with case handling.
 - The contact centre initially experienced a reduction in calls and but has now returned to normal call volumes, with high performance levels maintained throughout.
 - The repairs service was drastically reduced to comply with lockdown requirements, and major works were put on hold. A phased approach is being taken to remobilising repairs and major works contracts, with repairs services returning to normal with no notable impact on performance.
 - The economic impact has affected residents directly, with an increase in the number of tenants claiming Universal Credit which has led to a reduction in rent collection.

2 Customer services - Contact Centre

- 2.1** Prior to lockdown the Housing Contact Centre was office based. New laptops were provided in the week before lockdown to support remote working, and the service has continued to operate effectively with performance levels higher than for the 19/20 financial year. Call volumes dropped at the start of lockdown but have now returned to normal levels for the time of year. Performance has been very strong throughout with 94% of calls handled and 75% of calls answered within 30 seconds for the year to date.
- 2.2** Customer satisfaction, empathy and engagement levels are above 90%, based on surveys of over 2000 customers. This has been a key focus for the Contact Centre and the team have developed a plan of work to improve overall customer satisfaction. This has been through developing a coaching culture with training for both Customer Service Advisors and Team Managers in product knowledge and soft skills, supplemented by external training on customer service, letter writing and coaching skills.
- 2.3** All staff have been educated on the quality framework and adherence to the expected standards are monitored daily. This has resulted in a significant uplift in all satisfaction measures. Empathy has improved by 4% in the last six months to 93% (using Bright UK industry standards) which is over 10% above the industry norm.
- 2.4** A digital flag has been developed to highlight residents on our main housing databases who are self-isolating. Data is being collected through contacts and is being shared with staff and contractors to respect the needs of residents.

2.5 Complaints and Member Enquires

54 complaints have been received this year, with 88% resolved within the 10-day target. 15% of complaints have escalated from stage 1 to stage 2.

158 members' enquiries have been received year to date with 96% responded to in target.

The service is working to implement a new complaints code published by the Housing Ombudsman in July 2020, which sets out the new powers in the HO scheme. It requires all Social Housing Landlords to self-assess against the Code and ensure compliance by the 31 December 2020. The purpose of the Code is to enable landlords to resolve complaints quickly and to use the learning from complaints to drive service improvements.

3 Repairs

- 3.1** During lockdown the repairs and maintenance service was restricted to health and safety related repairs including responsive emergencies, planned inspections and servicing programmes.
- 3.2** The responsive repairs service recommenced for non-emergency works on a phased basis from June with plumbing and electrical works. Further trades will be added as pre-COVID work in progress is cleared. This approach has allowed contractors to un-furlough staff to clear the works put on hold at the start of lockdown and to manage a gradually increasing new workload. The re-start has been accompanied by resident consultation and communications.

- 3.3** Resident's wellbeing and safe-guarding is always a main priority and all work is carried out in line with HM Government guidance and appropriate PPE and risk assessments.
- 3.4** All repairs in sheltered accommodation have a specific risk assessment produced and signed off prior to the commencement of works. Housing continue to work closely with colleagues in Adult Social Care to ensure homes remain well maintained whilst protecting the health of residents.
- 3.5** Residents who had their repairs put on hold during lockdown have been contacted by letters, text messages and emails to advise them how to contact us to reschedule their appointment. Repairs requested before lockdown will be completed by October, subject to access. Once the backlog is cleared, the full responsive repairs service will be reinstated.
- 3.6** Routine Repairs are now being offered for most trades based on appointment availability within 60 days. This is a change from the contracted 30-day priority to build in capacity for repair spikes over the next few months and assist with service delivery and in turn provide greater control over contractor resources.
- 3.7** Repairs performance has been good across the reduced service with both customer satisfaction with the service and satisfaction with the quality of the repair up slightly on last year. Survey results are based on a random sample of 808 tenants, with a confidence interval of +/-3%. It has not been possible to carry out in-flat post inspections, but any issues have been picked up through satisfaction monitoring and calls to the contact centre.

4 Voids

- 4.1** Following Government guidance, lettings were initially suspended and re-let times have been lengthened considerably.
- 4.2** Lettings are now taking place with the benefit of a new digital lettings process, including virtual viewings and electronic signup to minimise contact.
- 4.3** New tenant satisfaction is running at 89% for the year to date compared with 86% for 2019/20, and the new processes have been received well.

5 Health and Safety Compliance

- 5.1** Statutory testing and inspections of services including gas appliances, water tanks, asbestos and fire risk assessments continued throughout lockdown, with staff taking additional health and safety precautions as appropriate.
- 5.2** Gas servicing performance has slipped and at the end of July 118 tenanted properties were without a current gas safety certificate. This is due to residents who continue to shield being reluctant to allow access to their homes. A concerted effort is being made by housing management and repairs teams to reassure residents of the safety precautions that are taken to protect all involved but some residents remain cautious.
- 5.3** A new asbestos inspection contract has been procured and is now mobilising. A plan is in place for clearance of the outstanding inspections from October – December 2020. Asbestos remediation works have been delayed but plans are in place for recovery. Of the outstanding high-risk asbestos remediation projects, six involve communal heating systems and will be completed before the heating systems are turned on in October. The remaining outstanding works are in the capital programme which was halted. They have

been priced and works are due to commence in October and all works will be completed by the end of the financial year.

- 5.4** Planned major works were put on hold during lockdown and spend is reduced accordingly. Work has now commenced again, with the support of communications to residents to address the queries residents may have about the safety of the works restarting. We have received a small number of queries and the cautious approach has been received well.

6 Neighbourhood services

- 6.1** Neighbourhood services responded swiftly to lockdown, to maintain visibility of the service in new ways. Resident meetings are now held on Zoom, including fortnightly meetings with resident representatives and the Cabinet Member for Housing Services. This has helped to ensure the service remains close to its customers and alert to local issues.
- 6.2** The Housing Area Service Centres have moved to an appointment based service and measures have been taken to ensure that the offices and interview rooms are COVID-Secure. This includes screened receptions, screened resident interview rooms, reduced office capacity and new hygiene measures. Residents can arrange to come in for face to face meetings by appointment, but fewer residents are requesting face to face services and many are cautious about inviting officers and contractors into their homes.
- 6.3** Tenancy checks to target potential fraud cases were suspended during lockdown and resources redirected to welfare calls to vulnerable residents. The numbers of both tenancy checks and unlawfully occupied properties recovered are therefore down for the year to date.
- 6.4** The housing management teams have identified and contacted vulnerable residents and provided regular contact and support as needed. We intend to sustain this proactive work to support vulnerable residents.
- 6.5** The Estate Services team is using a new mobile working 'app' to report issues found to the relevant service area or provider. The service covers repairs, parking, pest control and ASB. Staff are maintaining their presence to complete estate inspections, identifying communal issues focusing on health and safety.
- 6.6** Estate cleaning has continued with the frequency of some tasks amended such as touch points in communal areas (handrails, door handles and lift panels) and satisfaction with estate cleaning remains high with both tenants and lessees.
- 6.7** Sports pitches, youth clubs, organised sporting activity and outdoor gyms have been reopened following a sequence of Government guidance. An enhanced cleaning regime is in place to keep all spaces safe.

Antisocial Behaviour

- 6.8** The Antisocial behaviour service has seen a 34% increase in reported cases from March - July compared with the same period last year. 376 incidents have been reported since April with 60% relating to noise nuisance and verbal abuse. 17% of cases concern substance misuse and dealing. The housing ASB team are working closely with the noise team to tackle ASB and with the communications team to provide help and assistance to residents relating to ASB.

- 6.9** June 2020 was the highest month on record for new reports of ASB, with 133 new cases. Despite the increase in volume, customer satisfaction levels are rising and reached 70% in July.
- 6.10** The current ban on evictions has impacted on the action we are able to take to resolve the worst cases of ASB and the service currently has three cases that under normal circumstances would have been progressed for possession. The ban is lifted on 20 September and these cases will be referred to court at that point.
- 6.11** Two cases will be taken under mandatory grounds following criminal convictions relating to noise, harassment of a neighbour and links to a recent unlicensed music event.
- 6.12** In the absence of possession action, other legal tools have been used to provide residents with some protection from ongoing ASB, including:
- civil injunctions to prohibit behaviours with the power of arrest attached
 - solicitor's letter before action warning of the action to be taken.
 - Premises Closure Orders – to close a property for a period of 3 months
 - Partial Premises Closure Orders – to close a property for 3 months in exception of the resident/ named person(s)
- 6.13** Other tools in use include:
- Acceptable Behaviour Agreements - a non-legal agreement in place for 6 months made with the perpetrator of low level continued nuisance.
 - Acceptable Behaviour Contracts - as above but for those under 18 and in partnership with local police teams
 - Mediation
 - Enforcement interviews and warning letters
 - Non-legal banning letters – a letter asking the person to refrain from entering an area they have been identified to be causing low level nuisance in.
 - Working closely with the police to conduct patrols to specific hotspots and properties
- 6.14** The service has also increased its contact with residents who are living with ASB from neighbours to ensure they are supported. This includes:
- increased electronic contact with victims through teams calls, phone calls and update emails
 - large scale “virtual” door knocks to blocks affected by ASB – this has seen a high response rate compared to in person door knocks as residents feel more comfortable to discuss their concerns on the phone
 - making wide use of one on one conflict coaching with a professional mediator
 - working with our comms team to ensure resident FAQs are continually updated to reflect current reports and trends in ASB
- 6.15** We have also launched an online ASB reporting service through the housing online portal. This service is for tenants and lessees and allows residents to report and update their open cases directly to our ASB team in a convenient way

7 Rent Collection

- 7.1** Rent collection performance is running at 96.23% compared with 98.72% at July 2019. The income team has moved away from a traditional patch based approach to be able to use resources more effectively to respond to new arrears cases as they arise.
- 7.2** Standard rent collection was paused until the end of July 2020. The approach remains support focused and payment reminders are not referencing court or evictions. On 21 August 2020 the ban on evictions was extended for four further weeks, taking the total ban to six months. New six month notice periods are to be in place until at least 31 March 2021. Once eviction hearings restart, it is expected that the judiciary will carefully prioritise the most serious cases including those involving anti-social behaviour and domestic abuse.
- 7.3** The number of tenants claiming Universal Credit (UC), has increased 40% since January and there is a 5 week wait for the first payment in arrears.
- 7.4** Our programme of support includes referrals to employment services and signposting to the Citizens Advice Bureau and other external agencies. Over 400 residents who are looking for work have been referred to the Council's employment services.
- 7.5** Work continues to promote Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to a targeted audience working in conjunction with colleagues in housing benefit.

8 Leasehold service charge collection

- 8.1** Lessee service charge collection performance remains good and we are yet to identify an increase in arrears on the portfolio.
- 8.2** The service charge team are currently monitoring all service charge accounts and are keeping a log of any references to COVID19 which may impact on our leaseholder's ability to pay their service charge. Once again, no standard debt recovery action is being taken at this time. Payment reminders are being sent with an emphasis on support and assistance.